



STATEMENT OF

THE HONORABLE VANESSA FUENTES

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LEAGUE OF CITIES TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE SERVICES  
COMMITTEE ON BEHALF OF THE NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES

BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND  
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“AMERICA BUILDS: THE STATE OF THE NATION’S TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM”

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Good morning, Chairman Graves, Ranking Member Larsen, and Members of the Committee.

I am Mayor Pro Tem Vanessa Fuentes, from the City of Austin, Texas. Thank you for inviting the National League of Cities (NLC) to testify today as the Committee begins the bipartisan work to reauthorize the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). Across the country, the IIJA has helped communities make core infrastructure investments, rebuild and reimagine aging infrastructure, spur partnership, and put a needed focus on safety. While IIJA has been a gamechanger across the country, momentum for continuing the infrastructure work must continue, and I am pleased to have this opportunity to share local priorities as the Committee prepares for reauthorization.

The National League of Cities represents cities of all sizes as we work together to ensure a strong federal-local partnership for our country. I am honored to be here as a representative of Austin and our region as well as a representative of the nation's more than 19,000 cities, towns and villages in each Congressional district. While I represent a large hub city, nearly half of America's local governments have a population of less than 1,000 residents, yet 63% of all Americans live within an incorporated city, town or village.

I serve as Chair of the NLC Transportation & Infrastructure Services Federal Advocacy Committee. Local elected officials from throughout the nation serve on the Committee, representing municipalities of all sizes ranging from New Martinsville, WV (population 5,087) to Doraville, GA (population 10,623) to West Allis, WI (population 58,874) to St. Petersburg, FL (population 263,553) to Mesa, AZ (population 511,648) and my own City of Austin (population 979,882). Many city leaders are also board members of metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), rural transportation planning organizations (RTPOs), as well as transit, rail, airports, and port authorities leading our nation's largest transportation organizations alongside our business and state partners.

I represent the City of Austin as a Board Member of the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (CAMPO), the MPO for six central Texas counties with a population closing in on 2.5 million people. Austin and the entire region served by CAMPO have experienced considerable economic and population growth over the past two decades. Working with Texas Department of Transportation and with considerable regional cooperation, Austin and other local governments in our region have raised billions to make investments in highways, local streets and roads, and transit. In Austin alone, voters have approved multiple bond measures totaling billions of dollars targeted specifically to improving local mobility. Through the IIJA and robust federal partnership, these locally-led investments by Austin and other local governments are stretched further throughout the nation to ensure we keep up with the nation's infrastructure needs.

## *Local Partners Prioritize Infrastructure*

No matter how small or large your community or where you live in our great nation, infrastructure is essential to building a great community and a great economy. In NLC's annual [State of the Cities](#) report, cities of all sizes consistently rank economic development and infrastructure as top priorities, and local government budgets reflect those priorities with substantial investment in maintenance and capital through locally raised revenue that help keep up our roads and bridges, rail and buses, airports and seaports, and so much more. Infrastructure is also linked to other key economic development priorities such as growing the housing supply, connecting manufacturing and business facilities, meeting workforce needs, and reducing costs for small businesses.

Local governments are substantial owners and major investors in America's full transportation network – including 77.4% of the nation's highway lane mileage, 50% of the nation's bridges, and 46% of urban and rural transit providers – and value the opportunity of IIJA to become an effective infrastructure partner with the federal government while also growing regional partnerships with our metropolitan and rural transportation planning organizations. Together with our state partners we pay the majority of America's infrastructure bills and seek greater collaboration with our state partners. This is why cities of all sizes applauded the increased federal investment in infrastructure through IIJA because it opened more opportunities to leverage local funding to rebuild and incentivize us to collaborate on what is needed. We have seen many productive partnerships emerge – cities like Athens, OH, put together collectives of small cities to pursue federal grants, states like Louisiana set up technical assistance to help their communities pursue grants, states like Iowa helped meet the match on local safety projects, and cities have partnered with their MPOs and counties to pursue grants.

Whether a large city like Austin, Texas, or a mid-sized city like Dayton, Ohio, or a smaller city like Mission, Kansas, infrastructure is the foundation for our local economic future, yet the infrastructure costs often far exceed what a community can raise to handle the maintenance and improvements on their annual balanced budgets or through municipal bonds over time. Even the largest and most capable communities can face severe limits on their self-help infrastructure revenue mechanisms or state program access. For example, local option sales taxes are only authorized to cities in [29](#) states and local option fuel tax is authorized in only 16, and a survey of state budgets show that on average only [14%](#) of state transportation funds pass through to local governments. Most communities are using every available revenue option to fund infrastructure today so without federal-local partnership, projects of all sizes and scope will languish.

Passing the IIJA was one of the most substantial investments that Congress has made in our country's future, and federal infrastructure investment is celebrated locally as the essential partnership that was needed to invest in the nation's often worn-out and patched together networks. With Congress' support, more than 72,000 infrastructure projects are moving forward today – including 1,500+ core transportation projects led directly by cities and towns building the safety and performance of our transportation networks, supporting jobs and growing economic development.

### *Return on Investment for Continuing IIJA*

While the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress will make many national budget decisions, reducing infrastructure investment from IIJA levels would be a \$1 trillion dollar economic mistake. The [American Society of Civil Engineer's 2024 "Bridging the Gap"](#) economic scenario analysis compares the outcomes of continuing to invest at IIJA levels versus snapping back to prior FAST Act levels, and there is a clear difference:

- as much as \$1 trillion-dollar gross economic output lost from major U.S. job sectors (e.g. healthcare, manufacturing, professional services),
- 237,000 American jobs at stake, and
- \$550 billion in disposable income for American families lost.

When it comes to Congress making a return on the American taxpayers' investment, IIJA-level investments can deliver nearly \$700 every year in savings for American families over the next twenty years by continuing a robust program across multiple essential infrastructure types like transportation, water and energy.

Together, local, state and federal governments are digging out of a \$3.7 trillion investment deficit that could not have been clearer – bridges have fallen, water systems are failing, broadband internet is spotty, and the energy grid struggles. Much like our government deficit, we should not let an unreasonable infrastructure deficit grow unchecked and harm our country's future. Cities and towns urge Congress to embrace the positive economic impact of keeping infrastructure funding at IIJA's levels as the Committee negotiates the topline goals of the next package. This is the level of funding the American economy requires and the American people deserve.

### *Support Collaborative Transportation and Competition*

America's local governments are committed to transportation partnership at the federal and regional level to deliver IIJA's projects. Across the country, Congress' IIJA investment has spurred more collaboration among all the transportation partners through new and competitive programs – local governments, metropolitan planning organizations and rural transportation planning organizations, tribes, states and transportation service providers. Rather than 50 organizations, there are now 25,000+

local transportation leaders in the U.S. assisting every project and pushing strategically for the infrastructure investments that will be in place for the next generation.

As we renew our infrastructure investment, NLC urges Congress to prioritize continued infrastructure collaboration with America's cities, towns, and villages through direct and regional programs that are positioned to push for performance in transportation for Americans' daily trips and freight movement. The majority of car trips are [local](#), freight trips and deliveries begin and end on local roads, yet no federal funding program collaboratively addresses this essential portion of America's network. While we should consider how to structure federal programs more efficiently, the continued success and oversubscription of competitive and multimodal programs, like the Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) grants, shows we are not meeting a substantial number of infrastructure needs with core programs alone. A balance of federal programs that incentivize healthy competition can prioritize economically valuable and needed projects in all areas of the country. Continuing to have programs that allow for engagement of the nation's 25,000+ IIJA infrastructure supporters will bring national commitment to fund and rebuild collaboratively in very different places. Federal infrastructure programs should direct energy into rebuilding with healthy levels of competitive and reliable funding.

### *Build a Safer Network in Every Congressional District*

In transportation, we commit to safety first, yet the U.S. was losing 100 American lives on our roads each day prior to IIJA. Congress made a significant change in IIJA by adding a bottom-up approach with the [Safe Streets program](#) specifically targeted to local and regional mobility that has already started saving friends' and families' lives. Due to the local safety commitment in the IIJA and grants in every state, the nation's traffic fatalities are declining for the ninth straight quarter, which is a [3.2 percent](#) decline in 2024 compared to the same period in 2023.

More than 1,600 communities of all sizes across the country – from Las Vegas, NV, to Mount Rainer, MD, to Box Elder, SD – are now advancing safety projects in equal [balance](#) of urban and rural areas that will save more lives. While it will take continued effort to keep reducing road fatalities, every family member and community that has lost a loved one on the roads wants to know that we have federal grants that are responsive and not going to wait to make the roads and intersections safer. IIJA's safety investments with local and regional governments are helping create a macro-level change that top-down approaches alone with other programs were not, showing a potential strategy for Congress' future programs of structuring both bottom-up and top-down programming.

Cities and regions are also finding safety and efficiency gains are being supported in other multimodal grants. Corridor improvements are showing great promise with RAISE grants spurring improved safety and mobility in places like Notus, ID, Charleston, WV and Charlotte, NC. America's rail corridors are transforming with more reliable funding through IIJA and new and returned rail service, and the Rail Corridor Identification and Development Program bringing a renewed vision for rail in the U.S. which welcomed by small towns with limited airport access. In fact, [over 12,000 American cities and towns have railroad tracks coming through their communities.](#)

However, 65% of all rail incidents in the last decade occurred within city boundaries, many at railroad crossings and yards next to communities' schools, hospitals, homes, and businesses. Cities are finding solutions by using the [Railroad Crossing program](#) to limit blocked crossing problems and keep traffic moving in places like Wellington, KS, Superior, WI, and Fairfield, OH, while Reconnecting Communities grants are allowing communities to make safety connections in Waterloo, IA, Austin, TX, and Frankfort, KY among others.

A robust federal partnership will ensure that local governments can continue to be a powerful force in solving national challenges like road and rail safety. Every Congressional district deserves a safe network and direct investment, and America's local governments continue to urge Congress to double-down on safety and ensure we are protecting our most valuable economic generator – our people.

### *America's Rebuilding Process Improvements*

Implementing the IIJA at the U.S. Department of Transportation and moving all the necessary work forward on a five-year schedule was a substantial effort, especially with the global pandemic and economic reverberations like inflation impacting project costs, yet these conditions are hopefully now in the rear view. Ahead of the U.S. is the opportunity to deliver infrastructure projects, build accountability for every federal dollar, and expedite and right-size the federal processes for infrastructure projects – especially for those projects that are relatively small, supplementary to existing right-of-way, environmentally beneficial, and safety-related to ensure effective delivery of projects that benefit all Americans. The U.S. should continue to move toward an outcome-based transportation structure where each region is fully empowered to support national goals and collaborate to set prioritization of projects with our states.

Members of Congress, state and local leaders, and the public should be able to follow infrastructure progress and budgeting on all programs and projects. The U.S. could also benefit greatly from investing in shared tools, open data and mapping platforms for infrastructure management that roll up into national reporting consistently. Federally funded transportation research and manuals should be better affiliated with regional

transportation innovation goals to become more practical and less limiting, and we can build deployment models like the Strengthening Mobility and Revolutionizing Transportation (SMART) program to leverage testing and expediting new entrants to transportation like advanced air mobility, autonomous transit, AI-driven signaling, and much more.

NLC looks forward to supporting the Committee in the reauthorization of the IIJA, and together, with our state and business partners here, we can continue to build on the economic development, safety, and innovation that is possible with sustained investment. Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee, and I look forward to your questions.